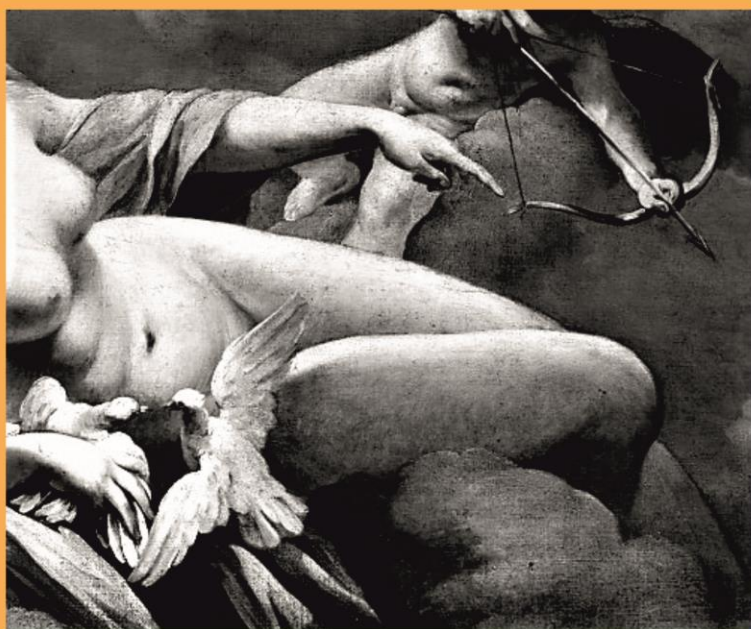


Alio Sermone



*Sour grapes,
sweet lemons
and learned
helplessness*
What games do we play?

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(filologia angielska)

The psychological phenomena mentioned in the title share one common denominator. They serve us, whether consciously or not, as a shield for when we suffer a crushing defeat or lose an important battle. Though seemingly of no value, the ability of making an excuse plays both a fundamental and a daily role in our lives. The process of excusing ourselves gives us more mental sanity than we can probably imagine possible. It takes off an unbelievably heavy and petty weight from our shoulders and downplays our fiaschi. Rationalization of our failures gives the strength to power through them as well as to forgive and forget. Described below are three out of many mechanisms we use to save our reputation and sense of self-worth. To understand the three mechanisms better, I will provide an example for each instance.

Sour grapes

Imagine you and your friend both want to get into the Biology Department. It has been your plan for as long as you can remember. Finally, the day comes

you both apply and later your friend calls to say she got in. The results were supposed to be online since midnight. Of course, you say how happy you are for her but your hands start shaking uncontrollably and you feel all types of heart palpitations at this point. Immediately, you go looking for a piece of paper with your password jotted down a month ago left in the most disremembered drawer in your room. You log in and the message you see on the front page is marked red. You never read it, you realize it is a rejection. You close the page and hang up the phone. However, time passes and a couple of weeks later you meet your biologist-to-be friend. After the required small talk you feel obliged to say that it is for the best you are not there studying with her because clearly, there are no real jobs in the field anyway. What happened here is, you made the grapes that seemed so sweet to you just a month ago go sour so that you could stop beating yourself up about not getting in. Sour grapes is a defense mechanism that helps you rationalize. The author of the article, “Self-Deception I: Rationalization Human beings are not rational, but rationalizing animals.”, Neel Burton M.D explains it best:

Rationalization is the use of feeble but seemingly plausible arguments either to justify something that is difficult to accept or to make it seem ‘not so bad after all’.

It is only human to do so and it is a natural reaction for something we have not expected would occur. The term cognitive dissonance is useful here. It is a process in which two elements surprisingly do not go together as we think they should. Referring to the example: not getting into Biology Department is something the girl did not expect hence: the cognitive dissonance. To cope, she activates a defense mechanism called rationalization and her brain starts to look

for fanciful and elaborate excuses of why biology is possibly the worst carrier path to follow. In other words, things go sour, literally and figuratively.

Sweet lemons

Picture a fight, a huge one. A fight so huge that it could break your relationship up in a matter of seconds and the worst part is it absolutely and indisputably your fault. Maybe you have revealed the biggest and most guarded secret of your boyfriend or girlfriend, they found out and now you have betrayed their trust. Or maybe you have been at a party by yourself and your partner has just found out that you have been a little too flirty with their best friend while tipsy. It does not matter because they move out, wishing you a miserable life, hoping to never see you again. The problem is, it was just one silly mistake and when you think about it your partner could have been “the one”. However, what’s done is done and after calling and texting: “I’m so sorry” for the hundredth time your thought process is dramatically changing. Suddenly, one day you think it is for the best you have split up. It was clear to see you were not meant for each other. What kind of person likes “The Hobbit” anyway? Now, you have a chance to find yourself someone brand new and you are extremely thrilled at the possibilities and beyond ready for this change.

This is an example of sweet lemons. Now, the procedure goes in exact opposition to the case of sour grapes. Often when we experience a situation in which we have done something wrong or the world is just simply not in our favor our natural instinct is to look for the bright side. No matter how ridiculous and irrelevant it might turn out to be. We try to excuse ourselves, to somehow justify the way we acted is alright as something good could come out of this. It is yet another mechanism that is helpful when dealing with the sense

of guilt, embarrassment or social marginalization we may experience after committing an evil deed, for instance.

Learned helplessness

Meet Paul who is on the verge of turning eighteen and finds his life is changing for the worse. When he was younger his mother would bring his food right to the table, wash and iron all his shirts, pay the phone bill and always add more credit to his Oyster card. Now, he finds the fuel tank is empty, none of his clothes are washed and he has to make his own dinner tonight. How did this happen and why? His mother should know he is terrible at paying taxes, completely hopeless at cooking and he has no idea how to do laundry. He told her a thousand times. Is he truly so terrible at doing those things or did he learn it is best to be terrible at them? Being helpless is safe, it means somebody else will have to take on the responsibility and do the work that was meant for us. Again, we are not always both purposely and consciously resorting to being helpless just in order to gain benefits. We might as well be subconsciously afraid of a failure and convince ourselves we are terrible at paper work, for instance. This way we are shifting responsibility on the poor husband who has to rise to the challenge and do it himself.

Gillian Fournier perceives learned helplessness as “A condition in which a person or animal has come to believe he or she is helpless in a situation, even when this is untrue.” Interestingly, Fournier notes that this kind of behavior may begin to manifest itself in early childhood or baby stage. She claims, “This type of issue can be caused by many things such as a distant mother or a way of thinking that includes broad generalizations based on previous experiences.” Whatever the causes, it is helpful to reflect in which aspects of life do we choose to be helpless at and what can be done to take back the control.

Guilt, frustration and disappointment could easily eat us alive if it wasn't for defense mechanisms we fall back on. Albeit, when we are cognizant of their presence, we can see ourselves and our failures clearer. Ignorance is bliss but being aware of these processes can help you understand the ways and reasons why people rationalize failure and loss and upgrade your view of the world.

Works cited

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